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Organizing an Oral Reading Contest

-- A West German Example

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Abstract:

The national contest in oral reading held each year in West Germany provides a guideline for similar contests in other countries. On a point count system reminiscent of that used internationally for sports events, participants are rated on their oral presentation, the difficulty of the chosen work, and their comprehension of the text. Adaptation of the point system permits evaluation of oral readers performing in their second language. For successful local use of oral reading contests, the author recommends making participation voluntary, engaging nonparticipants as members of coaching teams, and attracting community interest to increase the affective rewards to the young readers.

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Organizing an Oral Reading Contest

-- A West German Example

As a result of a nineteenth century passion for spelling contests among the American pioneers, the United States today has a national spelling bee every year, ending with the selection of a champion speller from among thousands of young contestants in the middle grades. In West Germany, a yearly contest now selects a national champion of oral readers, including a champion among young people for whom German is a second language. The techniques used are directly transferrable to other languages and other nations. They can be employed to make oral reading a motivating event in local schools and demonstrate the pleasures of both reading and listening to a well done selection.

In the West German contest, the young readers, all of them in their sixth year of school, each make their own selection of a book from which they would like to read . They prepare an appropriate portion, and read it before an audience of other youngsters. The only literature which may not be used is poetry and material written in a dialect. The sponsors of the yearly competition, the Association of German Booksellers, emphasize that it is a contest of ability to read aloud effectively and convey the joys of literature, so that the quality of the literature a child chooses should play no role in selection of a winner.

Participants present an oral reading between three and five minutes long and are graded on three qualities, with a total of 20 credit points

possible: for oral reading technique, the judges may award from 1 to 10 points; for the difficulty of the chosen text, 1 to 5 points; for the young person's comprehension of the text, 1 to 5 points. The members of the jury are free to speak with each reader after the reading, as an aid to evaluating the reader's comprehension of the text. Audiences of other children plus interested adults are important, since one of the main goals of the contest is to demonstrate the pleasure of reading, and the contest motto is "Reading is fun!" -- Lesen macht Spass!

One especially interesting aspect is a special competition for children who are newcomers to the Federal Republic and whose native language is not German. These youngsters compete against each other, with the juries using an adapted point system. In addition to the basic 20 points, each bilingual child receives an extra 10 points, minus adjustments for the extent of his or her contact with the German language: -2 points if one parent is German-speaking, -1 point for each year of residence in Germany, and -1 point for each year spent in a German-speaking classroom. Children who have been in special classes for foreign pupils would not have points subtracted for those years. Any youngster is eligible who has been in Germany for no more than four years.

The sponsors hope that this section for bilingual children will promote appreciation for their attainments in German and encourage contact between and mutual appreciation of varied cultures and of each culture's way of thinking and feeling, as shown in the youngsters' selections and their presentation.

Generally, the oral reading contests begin in the local schools, with the school winners continuing on to township, district, and state levels, and finally the national competition. If a youngster's school is not participating, he or she may enter through a contest sponsored by a local library or bookstore, and the winners in such groups are considered equal to school winners. At the contest's upper levels, self-selected texts are supplemented by a required reading of an unprepared text by each contestant. Unprepared readings may also be used to decide between contestants in the case of a tie.

Winners at all levels receive a personal award certificate and a small plaque as well as a gift certificate for a book from the Association of German Booksellers. Each winner's school also receives a gift certificate, and winners at the state level are sent by the booksellers' association to the four-day national competition each summer in Frankfurt am Main.

Since the participants represent two different groups of schools (the general schools, called Hauptschulen, and the scientific or humanistic secondary schools, called Realschulen and Gymnasien), plus the bilingual section, there are three national winners. An extra award for these three students is a visit of several days length with a professional author. Their schools may display a traveling prize throughout the following year, and at the next competition, the previous winners serve as honored guests and pass the traveling prizes on to the new winners.

The national competition in 1976 marked the sixteenth year of the oral reading competition in West Germany, including West Berlin, and

the seventh year in which bilingual children were given an opportunity to display their talents. Beginning with a few schools, the contest has now spread to such an extent that more than 200,000 sixth graders (in a country with a total population of 62 million) participate each year.

Adapting the approach

A similar contest could be organized within your own classroom, school, and community. Use any convenient adaptation of the r ting system, and consider the following as you organize the contest:

1) Keep participation voluntary. Not everyone enjoys reading before an audier ce, and forced participation will undermine your main goal, which is to take oral reading out of being a method by which teachers assign grades and emphasize the joys of reading and sharing.

2) Expand the participating group by using support teams. Each reader, while preparing the text and practicing for a good presentation, can benefit from the coaching of other students. Give those students who prefer not to be oral readers the chance to participate as members of coaching teams--three or four coaches for each reader. Support teams give good advice on pronunciation, intonation, dynamics, interpretation, the attitude to be conveyed. While coaching, the teams are naturally also involved in listening, thinking, learning.

3) Use other students on the juries. Young people who prefer not to be oral readers may nevertheless be excellent jury members. This requires of them attentive listening and thinking as they try to assign

points to the readers' performances. Use juries of four or five individuals and pool their ratings, as is done at sports events--the techniques will be familiar to all who have watched Olympic game broadcasts in recent years.

4) Advertise your contest throughout the school and community. Get a group of teachers to help in organizing it and use each others' classes as your first audiences. Invite parents, local librarians, and bookstore owners to join the audience or to serve on juries along with students. Don't forget to invite your local school administrators, plus radio, TV and newspaper reporters.

Oral reading is fun. ... It can also let your community know that you have an active and varied reading program going, and your community can in turn let your students know their reading achievements are appreciated.

If you are interested in further information about the West German contest, contact: Börsenverein des Deutschen Buchhandels e.V., 6 Frankfurt am Main 1, Postfach 2404, West Germany.